

## My reflection during Covid pandemic

- Ngawang Choeden

During this pandemic, my faith in Tibetans public health knowledge came to a new dismal low. An elderly uncle in our settlement said Tibetans have inbuilt immunity, and our gods and oracles will protect us, come hell or high water. One Acha la believes Coronavirus is a hoax. It's severity is spiked by big hospitals to make more money. One local leader, echoing Donald Trump, said heat will kill the virus and pandemic will over by summer. It's been a very long summer since then, sadly virus is still among us.

When news of virus first came out of China, I have never thought Virus will took over the world. Like Ebola, MERS and SARS, it will be contain. Things will go on as usual. I was wrong. Coronavirus has wreaked havoc on the world economy, crippled health care system, further marginalized and impoverished the poor in society and sadly almost killed 1.5 million people around the world. And the Virus refused to remain as a WhatsApp forward joke and in China. By April, half the world has it. By now, no country remain immune. New Zealand remain only country to dealt successfully with the minimizing spread and containment.

When the cases of virus start spreading in late March and early April in India. It was a very unsettling and anxious time. There was limited medical study on coronavirus. I felt contracting coronavirus was like being given a death sentence. An inevitable death. Only later, when more studies and research assure us it was not an inevitable death. Virus tends to affect elderly and those with existing health problems. This left us half comforted. Feeling relieved, but helpless and sorry on part of my parents. Who are above 55 and with existing health complications.

As the virus spread outward, countries around the world look inward. Self isolates and enacts strict lockdown. There was an air of old Tibet resonance. Travel restrictions were issued. Flights from China and Europe came to halt. Things stand like a scene from a Hollywood apocalyptic movie. I never felt helpless in life like this year. But the lockdown was a necessary measure to stop the virus bringing more havoc.

Lockdown slowed the frantic world. For the first time hills of Mussorie were visible from Saharanpur. Fishes have returned to Venice canal. Elephant, native to dense forest of Hardiwar were seen for the first time in Poanta Cholsum settlement. It also slow us down. Someone has mastered Dalgona coffee. And one of my friends is baking bread every day. I might not be over enthusiastic as my friend. But I took up Dranyen. Learned cooking from mother and shared her home chores.

I remember when lockdown was first imposed in India, there was a migrant labor crisis. Migrant in big cities, left stranded and without roof and food. Travelled on foot to reach their village. One migrant, in an interview to a newspaper said Coronavirus might or might not kill us but lack of work, subsequent poverty and lack of food will surely kill us. We Tibetan might not have widespread poverty and lack of food to eat. But the pandemic has put a dent on only source of income for majority Tibetans in India. Complete halt to winter sweater selling business has hit

hard on many of us. Both my parents live off selling sweaters in winter. The work is taxing for four months. But it pays a comfortable dividend. Like us, more than half of Tibetan in India have lived like this and know only this profession. This setback makes us realize the importance of education and risk of unorganized business ventures. Today it was pandemic, tomorrow it will be big online businesses.

Lately, one thing I learned from this pandemic is our public memory is short. Collective effort needed to fight viruses is even shorter. When the lockdown was open, very few people were seen wearing masks. People move around as if the general public have been inoculated and virus defeated. Our community might not have seen anti-vaccination revolt like in the west and US. But public negligence to wear masks and avoid public gatherings was very discouraging. If civic duty to wear a mask were enforced by heavy fines and time in correctional facilities. It won't be long before we too will have people on the road saying wearing a mask infringes basic rights, like we saw in America.

At a time when the future seems uncertain. One saving grace from pandemic has been it brought nostalgia of gone by year. When the family gathered after dinner for a short prayer session. Followed by soap opera on black and white television, without all the animosity between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law that are prevalent these days. Short prayer session was and still is a grounding experience. It reaffirms one connection with one's spirituality.

Pandemic has also awakened hesitancy and naivety in us. Our village teacher is sunning the newspaper on the ground. My neighbor is washing vegetables in detergent soap. Someone is swearing by Mentsekhang Thang (flu tea) as Corona. Blocker. No mantra is left unsaid. No god uninvoked.

My gravest concern from pandemic was the well-being of his holiness the Dalai Lama. Dharamshala attracts tourists from all over the world. Early outbreak of the virus in Italy left me uncomfortable about large tourists from European countries visiting Dharamshala. And his holiness personal audiences and interactions left me in deep anxiety. Fortunately the office of the Dalai Lama acted promptly and put an end to all teachings and meetings. As an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara, sometimes I feel we need protection from him more than he needs from us. Not only from virus, but from hatred, vile, bigoted thoughts and willful ignorance. Which have come to light from this pandemic.

Lastly, pandemic has shed a light on the nature of human quality, specifically of my neighbors and settlement people. There was a study done by an acclaimed medical journal which correlates masks with selfishness. The study said, those who refused to wear masks are more selfish than those who do. And there were countless stories of those who were infected and were treated like outcasts. Like the early days of AIDS/HIV, those infected with Coronavirus were looked down, avoided and stigmatized. Even after defeating the virus and coming victorious. I heard sad full stories of indignity suffered and inhuman treatment meted. With the

possible vaccine in near future, we might return to partial normalcy. Unfortunately there will be no vaccine against these ignorance.